



Program would keep some out of jail

Editorial

09/15/06

Messenger-Inquirer

It was a lot easier to stay out of jail in Kentucky 36 years ago, and the cost of incarcerating criminals was a lot less than it is today.

According to one study, Kentucky puts seven times more people behind bars now than it did in 1970, even though the crime rate is no higher now than it was then. At an annual cost of almost \$10,000 for each prisoner, one can see how quickly the expense adds up. That's where a promising pilot program being tried in Owensboro and a couple of other places in Kentucky has the potential to make a difference by keeping some people out of jail and keeping them out of the judicial system in the future.

The Social Worker Pilot Project began Sept. 1. In Owensboro, social worker Rachel Pate is working with the attorneys in the Department of Public Advocacy -- public defenders - - to help reduce the number of repeat offenders by placing some of them in treatment and intervention programs.

Kentucky wants to save millions of dollars in incarceration expenses by eliminating repeat offenders. With the great majority of Kentucky inmates (70 to 80 percent) locked up because of drug law violations, helping some of them overcome their dependency problems is one way to keep them free.

Pate's role will be to investigate the histories of individuals who have been convicted and use that knowledge to draft and recommend to the courts alternative sentencing and probation arrangements, part of which will invariably include substance abuse treatment, housing and jobs. The same will be done to determine the amount of bail for persons who have been arrested and are awaiting trial.

Sentencing is far from an exact art and certainly can't be done in "one-size-fits-all" fashion. Programs like the one Pate will administer have the potential to help people convicted of crimes overcome problems that landed them in trouble in the first place, all the while saving the state taxpayer money. We hope the pilot program is given every chance to succeed.

KY Post: Stopping crime's revolving door

By Luke E. Saladin

Post staff reporter

Sept. 29, 06

Repeat customers are a good thing in most businesses, but not for public defenders. That's why officials with the Kenton-Campbell Public Defenders Office in Covington were delighted to learn it was one of three in the state selected to participate in a new pilot program that pairs social workers with attorneys to help treat offenders suffering from drug abuse and mental health issues.

The Kentucky Department of Public Advocacy is administering the program.

The social worker in the Kenton-Campbell office will counsel offenders in the areas of drug abuse and mental health and also direct them to other agencies that specialize in treatment.

John Delaney, director of the Kenton-Campbell Public Defenders Office, said the program offers a welcome alternative to simply sending offenders with drug problems and mental illnesses to jail and having them emerge with the same problems that got them there in the first place.

"Sometimes our office just feels like a revolving door, even though many of the people we deal with truly want to succeed" Delaney said. "Hopefully, this is a sign that we cannot incarcerate ourselves out of the drug problems and mental illness problems, because when they are released they are going to fall right back into the same old problems."

Delaney's office currently has about 13 attorneys and a half dozen support staffers. He said if the program could help keep three people out of jail a year, that would save his office more money than the cost of the social worker's salary and benefits.

Delaney noted that many judges will allow those convicted of a crime to avoid jail time if they can demonstrate that they are making progress in putting their lives back together, which the social worker can help facilitate.

The pilot program reflects a trend at the state level of moving toward more preventive measures to keep people out of jail, rather than employing harsher and longer punishments.

Earlier this year, the Kenton County jail received a grant of \$67,766 to combat mental health and drug abuse among its inmates. The jail, which is constantly at or above capacity, used the money to contract with Talbert House, a Cincinnati nonprofit that specializes in mental health and substance abuse services.

According to a study by the Kentucky Drug Control Assessment Summit Report, only 20 percent of those in need of substance abuse treatment while serving time in local jails ever receive it.

Jacqueline Joiner, who holds a master's degree in social work from the University of Cincinnati, will join the Covington public defender's office Oct. 1. Joiner, who has experience with the Community Action Agency and schools in Hamilton County, will initially work with clients accused of nonviolent crimes. A third of them will be juveniles.

"It's a big problem, but now we have a huge opportunity to address that problem," Joiner said. "I want to hold the hand of each client until they successfully re-enter their homes and jobs."

Pilot Program to assess public advocacy clients

By Chris McCoy, The Morehead News

Sarah Grimes, a graduate in social work from Morehead State University, has been hired by the Department of Public Advocacy (DPA), for a new Social Worker Pilot Project.

The Morehead Public Defender Office will be one of three offices statewide where the DPA will place a social worker in the office to work with those who have been incarcerated, according to a DPA press release.

Grimes said, "I will be working with clients who have mental illnesses or addiction and who could benefit more from treatment instead of incarceration, with proper treatment, those enrolled in this program could successfully be integrated back into society with a lesser chance of becoming re-offenders." She said the goal of this project is to stop the cycle of criminal behavior. The program will focus on willing participants and those who Grimes and the attorneys believe would benefit the most.

"Basically, we are helping them help themselves and empowering them to do these things on their own," Grimes said.

Areas of treatment the pilot attempts to address include chronic alcohol and substance abuse, mental illness, and illiteracy. According to the DPA there is a correlation between these problems and criminal behavior. By placing clients in treatment rather than placing them in jail, DPA officials believe money will be saved.

Dawn Jenkins, Executive Advisor of the DPA, said DPA wants to help resolve these core problems; otherwise, we will see people re-enter our door in the future.

Jenkins said the state is incarcerating more people than ever at a cost of \$9,958 per person in jail and \$17,198 per person in prison annually. She said savings would come from diverting a client from jails and prisons into the community care centers.

"The success of this pilot is so important and critical because of the huge, huge overcrowding in jails and prisons throughout the state," Jenkins said.

Grimes has had experience working with clients overcoming addiction and has helped find treatment alternatives for them. During the pilot, Grimes will work with clients accused of nonviolent crimes, one third of clients will be juveniles. After assessing and overseeing a client's entry into treatment, Grimes will follow the progress of the client for six months.

Steve Geurin, Directing Attorney in the Morehead Public Defender Office said, "The numbers speak volumes about jail overcrowding. Rowan County Detention Center houses 100 plus inmates at any one time and is only a 78-bed facility. I have seen it as high as 130 in recent years. County residents must ask themselves, are we rehabilitating or merely warehousing them?"

Ernie Lewis, Kentucky's Public Advocate, "If Rowan County is reflective of the rest of the state, then 64% of jail inmates are mentally ill, 68% have substance problems and 50% are functionally illiterate. DPA wants to help resolve these core problems; otherwise, we will see them reenter our door in the future. As a criminal justice community, it is our responsibility to find the root problems and fix them. Social workers, working beside our attorneys are a proven solution. I believe this will result in the slowing of the revolving door of incarceration."